

David Cameron 'fuelling sectarian division by bringing God into politics'

Dozens of public figures accuse David Cameron of fostering alienation and division with call to view Britain as a Christian country



David Cameron: bringing God into politics Photo: Reuters

By John Bingham, Religious Affairs Editor

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David Cameron is sowing sectarianism and division by insisting that Britain is still a “Christian country” an alliance of writers, scientists, philopfers and politicians has claimed.

In a letter to The Telegraph, 55 public figures from a range of political backgrounds accuse him of fostering “alienation” and actively harming society by repeatedly emphasising Christianity.

The group, which includes writers such as Philip Pullman and Sir Terry Pratchett, Nobel Prize winning scientists, prominent broadcasters and even some comedians argue that members of the elected Government have no right to “actively prioritise” religion or any particular faith.

It comes after a series of public statements in which Mr Cameron has been increasingly vocal about his own faith.

Last week, in an article for the Church Times, the Prime Minister said Britain should be unashamedly “evangelical” about its Christianity.

He said he had no wish to “do down” those of other religions or no religion but also criticised those who demand a strict “neutrality” where belief is concerned, saying it would deprive Britain of a vital source of morality.

Going beyond the traditional warm words about Britain’s religious heritage often expressed at times such as Easter, he said he felt the “healing power” of faith in his own life.

His remarks were warmly received by faith leaders and seen as an olive branch to the churches after confrontations over welfare cuts and gay marriage and claims that the Government had failed stand up for Christians.

The signatories accused Mr Cameron of “mischaracterising” Britain with “negative consequences for our politics and society”.

They said they had decided to speak out because of what they see as increasingly common incursions of religion into politics.

The lead signatory Prof Jim Al-Khalili, the Iraqi born physicist and author – who is the current president of the British Humanist Association – said Mr Cameron’s intervention was just part of a “disturbing trend”.

They wrote: “We respect the Prime Minister's right to his religious beliefs and the fact that they affect his own life as a politician.

“However, we wish to object to his repeated mischaracterising of our country as a 'Christian country' and the negative consequences for our politics and society that this view engenders.”

They argued that, apart from a “narrow constitutional sense”, there is no evidence to justify describing Britain as Christian.

“To constantly claim otherwise fosters alienation and division in our society,” they wrote.

“Although it is right to recognise the contribution made by many Christians to social action, it is wrong to try to exceptionalise their contribution when it is equalled by British people of different beliefs.

“It needlessly fuels enervating sectarian debates that are by and large absent from the lives of most British people, who – as polls show – do not want religions or religious identities to be

actively prioritised by their elected Government.”

The 2011 census showed that the number of people in England and Wales who describe themselves as Christian plunged from almost 72 per cent in 2001 to just over 59 per cent, a decline of 4.1 million people.

Further analysis showed that even that fall masks the scale of underlying decline because it was bolstered by mass immigration, with 1.2 million foreign-born Christians coming to Britain.

“We wrote this letter as a result not just of one recent speech and article but of a disturbing trend,” said Prof Al-Khalili.

“Politicians have been speaking of our country as ‘a Christian country’ with increasing frequency in the last few years.

“Not only is this inaccurate, I think it's a wrong thing to do in a time when we need to be building a strong shared identity in an increasingly plural and non-religious society.”

Other signatories include Ken Follett, the novelist, Maureen Duffy, the poet and playwright, and philosophers such as AC Grayling.

Nobel Prize winning scientists, Sir John Sulston, the biologist, and Professor Sir Harold Kroto, the chemist, are among the group as are Prof Steve Jones, the leading geneticist and Dr Simon Singh, the science writer.

The comedians Tony Hawks, Richard Herring and Tim Minchin, have signed the letter as have the television presenters such as Dan Snow and Nick Ross, as well as a handful of politicians.

Mr Pullman said the increasing religious rhetoric goes against the grain of British life.

“It is probably an imitation of America, we imitate a lot of American things, but I think it is a very bad idea,” he said.

“It doesn't seem to me the sort of way in which I like to see a prime minister behave, or any politician for that matter.

“What people believe is their own business and we should not be told what to believe by anybody.”

Prof Jones said: “I just don't quite understand why he is coming up with it now.

“If it is being done for some electoral reasons I don't understand what they are.

"He would be much better as Prime Minister of the whole country not to say that this is a Christian country."

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, was asked about Mr Cameron's remarks during a BBC Easter broadcast from Canterbury Cathedral.

"We do need to be more confident," he said.

"At the heart of the Christian message is the idea that we have a friendship, a relationship with Jesus Christ who is alive and that the choice to be a follower of Jesus Christ is the most important and the best choice anyone can ever make in their lives in any circumstances.

"So the confidence that he expressed in Christian faith is something absolutely that we agree with."

A Downing Street spokeswoman said: "As the PM set out in his speech to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, the UK is Christian country and should not be afraid to say so.

"He also added that this was not to say in any way that to have another faith – or no faith – was somehow wrong.

"He has said on many occasions that he is incredibly proud that Britain is home to many different faith communities, who do so much to make the UK a stronger country."

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